Libby OU3

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Editor

In just more than two weeks, officials of the Environmental Protection Agency will gather in Helena to discuss water quality and much of that discussion will entail analysis of Kootenai River water and the two tributaries — Carney and Rainy creeks — that deliver Libby Amphibole Asbestos from the mine site into its waters.

Come Dec. 8 in Helena, EPA officials will discuss methods of reducing the levels of Libby Amphibole Asbestos (LAA) in the watersheds that feed the Kootenai River.

When plans were announced last month to conduct the sessions in Helena, the EPA, through Christina Progess, the site manager for the old W.R. Grace mine site more commonly referred to as Operable Unit No. 3 (OU-3), released the statement of the meeting to discuss the mine-area watersheds.

"Surface water sampling results of the Rainy Creek watershed show that Libby Amphibole Asbestos ... contamination from the former vermiculite mine site is reaching the Rainy Creek and its tributaries (Carney Creek)," the statement reads.

"The EPA is considering interim plans to reduce the sources of this contamination and to reduce the release of asbestos into the watershed."

Concerns of the contamination of the tributaries that ultimately reach the Kootenai, which is the River that runs through Libby, reached a pinnacle this summer when Rebecca Thomas, the Remedial Project Manager for the EPA, told Lincoln County Commissioners, testing of those waters in the tributaries revealed levels of asbestos 40 times greater than is allowed by the EPA.

At the time, Thomas told Commissioners tests revealed 280 million asbestos fibers per one liter of water were found in water coming off Rainy Creek. The EPA accepted level in drinking water is only 7 million fibers per liter.

The revelation has led Commissioner Tony Berget during each subsequent monthly updates to that board to inquire about those levels.

"I think the EPA is making an effort to clean up that water before it reaches the river," Berget said.

"They found out quite by chance that the (asbestos) fibers are sticking to the sides of the plastic, so maybe there is some cutting-edge technology that can be employed. Anything that can be done to reduce that number (of fibers) I'm for."

Berget said he also is hopeful that some determination can be made on how contaminated water affects fish.

"It can do it with other animals, I'd just like to know," Berget said.

The Rainy Creek watershed run-off has sparked criticism by Libby City Councilman DC Orr, who contends the water taken from the Kootenai River by a contractor working for the EPA to suppress dust at remediation work sites is cross-contaminating the very area the EPA is attempting to rid

of asbestos fibers.

However, test results from 2008 and again this year seem to ease those concerns.

"The EPA's investigation to define (the) nature and extent of contamination on OU-3 and to address surface water concerns along Rainy Creek and other tributaries have identified several sources of asbestos contamination to Rainy Creek:" the statement contends.

The document continues: "Asbestos-containing waste rock is located along the banks of Carney Creek. In some places Carney Creek forms pools behind the waste rock material, which contributes to the contamination of Carney Creek and, subsequently, Rainy Creek.

"Tailings-like material containing asbestos is located within the floodplain of Rainy Creek and along its banks downstream of the mill pond."

The statement confirms what Thomas revealed to Commissioners this summer, contending "results of surface water sampling in the Rainy Creek watershed show concentrations of asbestos in excess of State of Montana and EPA water quality benchmarks," that tested waters far exceeded the 7 million fibers per one liter benchmark established in the Safe Drinking Water Act Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) for asbestos.

"This level (7 million fibers per liter) is exceeded in Rainy Creek during certain times of the year. Asbestos levels are generally highest during periods of high water flow, such as spring runoff."

The report also noted, neither Carney Creek nor the Kootenai River are used as water sources in Libby. Libby residents receive their drinking water from Flower Creek and the reservoir located south of town. Ultimately, Flower Creek does flow into the Kootenai.

Mike Cirian, the resident Libby EPA site manager who makes his home here, was criticized this summer for his comment about the Carney Creek contamination, when he simply said, "Don't drink the water."

In retrospect, Cirian said his comment, who some saw as flippant, now says he simply was trying to define Carney Creek as a non-potable water source.

"Carney Creek is not a drinking water source," Cirian said. "It feeds the Kootenai, and we draw water from it for other uses, but it's not a source for our (drinking) water."

Cirian said one of the commonalities in environmental science is a way to minimize toxins is dilution.

"It's said dilution is the solution to pollution," Cirian said. "However, as environmentalists, we're not allowed to use that," he said admitting that's just what's happening naturally in the Carney and Rainy creek watersheds. "It's our job to treat the source of pollution, which is up there on the (mine)."

Cirian then offered an interesting analogy.

"That is what's happening. We've got (toxins) in an eye-dropper, going to a horse tank, and then that horse tank goes into a swimming pool and that swimming pool goes into a lake," Cirian said. "It is dilution."

EPA Water sampling tests of Kootenai River water taken from the Riverfront Park pump house — the point from which water is taken for dust suppression for remediation work — has revealed in nine of 10 events to show no detectable traces of asbestos. In the one case where there was a trace, it revealed a level below the required 7 million fibers per liter.

Thomas, the EPA's Remedial Project Manager, confirmed the data.

"(The) EPA uses water from the Kootenai River at Riverfront Park pump house for dust suppression and decontamination of equipment during property cleanups and for decontamination of equipment at the mine site," she said prefacing her statement.

"During 2011, EPA collected 10 water samples from the Riverfront Park pump house. The results were all non-detect for LA," Thomas said.

Thomas also provided a graphic detailing the testing.

Despite the dilution rate by the time the Carney Creek run-off reaches the Kootenai, the EPA is continuing its effort to improve water quality up in the Carney and Rainy Creek run-offs, Progess, the OU-3 site manager, said.

"The EPA and W.R. Grace are considering a range of interim cleanup actions to reduce asbestos concentrations in the Rainy Creek watersheds," Progess said.

"To ensure the most effective reductions in contaminant loading to the creeks, EPA and W.R. Grace will develop a surface-water management plan," she said. "The plan will include the drainages of Rainy, Carney and Fleetwood creeks and will address keeping clean water clean, as well as reducing the release of asbestos into the watershed.

Progess said the EPA plans to evaluate asbestos levels in surface water in other areas of the site in addition to OU-3 beginning in 2012. The sampling, she said, will be prepared in early 2012.